

The Myth of the Politics of Regret

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Abstract

This article argues for the need to think about the politics of regret more critically, within academia and beyond. The politics of regret here refers to the process through which the representation of past events comes to be dominated by apologetic voices in the public discourse. A brief overview of the most prominent previous attempts to make sense of the phenomenon shows why it is vital to strengthen the critical perspective to the issue. I assume that, in practice, the politics of regret almost always makes use of simplified representations of historical events that constitute images of the self and of wider society; as such, it should be properly understood as mythical. For this reason, I argue that the critical (scholarly and social) approach to the politics of regret should be based on a more general ethical framework to myths that simultaneously acknowledges the right to existence of all interpretations of the past (including political regret) and challenges the exclusionary characteristics of mythologies.

Keywords

Critical scholarship, memory politics, political mythology, politics of regret, public apology

Our times are sometimes described as a ‘mnemonic age’,¹ an ‘age of apology’,² an ‘age of shattered time’.³ For good or ill, the ‘cultural obsession’ with memory⁴ has indeed become a factor to count with in several societies and memory studies is considered by many as an emerging academic field in its own right.⁵ Particular attention has been paid to how wrongs committed in the past are commemorated. Among others, official apologies, remembrance days, reparations to victims and memorials have become widely used policy measures, often presented as attempts to ‘come to terms’ with the traumatic experience of mass crimes committed in the past.

This phenomenon, termed the ‘politics of regret’ by Jeffrey Olick,⁶ has attracted the attention of many scholars in recent years from a wide array of disciplines. Several works have explored this trend from a variety of angles: the moral necessity of remembering (or of

¹ Duncan Bell, ‘Agonistic Democracy and the Politics of Memory’, *Constellations* 15, no. 1 (2008): 148.

² Mark Gibney et al., eds, *The Age of Apology: Facing Up to the Past* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

³ Jeffrey K. Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 137.

⁴ Andreas Huyssen, ‘Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia’, *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (2000): 26.

⁵ Henry L. Roediger and James V. Wertsch, ‘Creating a New Discipline of Memory Studies’, *Memory Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 9–22.

⁶ Olick, *The Politics of Regret*.

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forgetting) past wrongs,⁷ the desirability or undesirability of the politics of regret in the light of its social implications,⁸ the meaning and genuineness of apology,⁹ its psychological assessment,¹⁰ etc. The aim of this article is to outline the framework of a critical engagement with the politics of regret. After dealing with some fundamental conceptual issues, I present a critique of the most prominent previous approaches to this phenomenon (namely the transitology, the historical sociology and the moral philosophy approaches). Building on these observations, I attempt to explain the possibility and the importance of thinking about the politics of regret more critically, within academia and beyond. I assume that many (indeed most) instances of the politics of regret should be properly understood as mythical; therefore, many conceptual and analytical considerations developed in the literature on political mythologies are relevant to its study. Drawing on different scholarly attitudes to myths, I discuss what a critical scholarly engagement with the politics of regret can be.

Critical scholarship is understood in this article in a broad sense. It is certainly inspired by the Critical Social Theory of the Frankfurt School but it does not necessarily accept its Marxist underpinnings. It is useful to think about the critical approach that I am about to develop in terms of Robert Cox's distinction between problem-solving and critical thinking. Problem-solving thinking, which I believe most of the previous approaches to the politics of regret follow, considers the importance of solving the problem at hand almost self-evident. It 'takes the world as it finds it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organised, as the given framework for action'.¹¹ In contrast, I propose a more critical scholarly attitude which problematizes the very social and political framework within which the questions asked by this problem-solving approach emerged as important and challenges the taken-for-granted assumptions upon which these questions are based. Critical thinking with respect to the politics of regret is not (and should not be) restricted to academia, of course. In practice, a critical attitude to political regret is part of a more general critical stance towards mythologies and mythical thinking that will be explained in detail in the last section of this article.

⁷ Nenad Dimitrijevic, *Duty to Respond: Mass Crime, Denial, and Collective Responsibility* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011); Trudy Govier, 'A Dialectic of Acknowledgement', in *Reconciliation(s): Transitional Justice in Postconflict Societies*, ed Joanna R. Quinn (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), 36–50; Linda Radzik, *Making Amends: Atonement in Morality, Law, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁸ Jon Elster, *Closing the Books: Transitional Justice in Historical Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁹ Elazar Barkan and Alexander Karn, eds, *Taking Wrongs Seriously: Apologies and Reconciliation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Nick Smith, *I Was Wrong: The Meanings of Apologies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Aaron Lazare, *On Apology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹¹ Robert W. Cox, 'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory', *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 10, no. 2 (1981): 128.

The Politics of Regret as a Myth

The term ‘politics of regret’ originally meant ‘a variety of practices with which many contemporary societies confront toxic legacies of the past’ in Olick’s understanding.¹² I have the impression that even he did not use the term consistently as in his writings it sometimes referred to all the institutions of transitional justice, sometimes only to state apology, and at other times to the ‘memory boom’ in general. For the purposes of this article, it is understood more narrowly as the process through which the representation of certain problematic past events comes to be dominated by apologetic voices which usually acknowledge the role of the state or of wider society in certain atrocities and thus take some degree of responsibility for them. Many approaches to past events do not express regret but instead rely on other strategies, such as denial or silence. Naturally, no single approach can completely dominate the discursive space about a part of the past in a society. This means that the politics of regret may be stronger and weaker in certain countries, has stronger and weaker forms, and always exists alongside and in contestation with non-regretful coping strategies. The case which illustrates this point well is Germany and its *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (working through the past) with respect to the Holocaust. A strong form of political regret has certainly been the dominant approach for some time, but its rise to prominence was a long and painful process; it was and still is challenged by weaker forms of political regret and by other coping strategies.¹³

My argument in this article rests on the assumption that instances of the politics of regret rely upon strong mythical stories of guilt. Myth, in this sense, needs to be carefully differentiated from the way it is used in everyday conversation (where it is usually understood to stand for a false belief, an untrue story), and also from the way it is often employed in anthropological accounts (where it refers to uncontested and incontestable narratives that ground the origins of a community). Following Duncan Bell, I understand myths to be ‘highly simplified narratives ascribing fixed and coherent meanings to selected events, people, and places, real or imaginary. They are easily intelligible, transmissible, and help constitute or bolster particular visions of self, society, and world’.¹⁴

Myths have been important for creating and sustaining nations, national communities and national identities. These representational practices traditionally rely on simple stories about golden ages, heroic acts and immeasurable suffering and sacrifice. The end of the nineteenth century, when monuments and celebrations aimed at strengthening nationalist feelings mushroomed throughout Europe, is often thought about as the first wave of the ‘memory boom’. For example, Bastille Day became a national holiday only in 1880, almost a century after the actual event. According to the mainstream narrative within memory studies, the second memory boom originated in the US in the 1980s and supposedly reached its peak in

¹² Olick, *The Politics of Regret*, 122.

¹³ Consider Willy Brandt kneeling before the monument commemorating the victims of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising as opposed to Helmut Kohl’s attempts to ‘normalise’ German foreign policy (that is, to render it free from the weight of the Holocaust); the heated public debate known as the *Historikerstreit* (historians’ dispute); the recurrent question of German victimhood during the Second World War.

¹⁴ Bell, ‘Agonistic Democracy and the Politics of Memory’, 151.

the mid-1990s.¹⁵ Olick suggested that the recent wave of state apologies for crimes that they have committed in the past heralds the arrival of a new form of self-legitimation, the politics of regret, which relies on the feeling of guilt, on the demand for regret, and on the exposition of shameful events instead of the glorification of the national past. While I do not agree with Olick's claim that the rise of apologetic discourses is necessarily the consequence of the decline of the nation state and of nationalist sentiments, I build on his two important observations: political regret is a novel form of self-legitimation and identification, and historical narratives of guilt play a vital role in its development and perpetuation. If we accept these empirical claims, it is easy to see why the politics of regret falls under the definition of myth given by Bell. I would even add that, as most myths, instances of political regret aspire to completely dominate the discursive space about the past events to which they refer. In order to achieve discursive domination and to be effective at constituting identities, they need to present themselves as the only true and legitimate narratives about the events in question.

Is it even theoretically possible to conceive of a non-mythical politics of regret? For this, a hypothetical case of political regret should have none of the properties that are attributed to myths. As it makes references to past events, the politics of regret does need to use historical narratives, similarly to myths. Unlike the ones underlying myths, however, the narratives of political regret can in principle be complex and aware of the fragility of historical truth claims. Presumably, such stories, difficult to understand and self-reflective about their own historical foundations, would also be less effective at promoting visions of the self and of the world to a huge number of people. For analytical purposes, we may think about this as the ideal type of the non-mythical politics of regret. Therefore, instead of asking whether instances of political regret are mythical or not, it makes more sense to ask to what extent actual cases of the politics of regret are mythical. It is useful to imagine a continuum between the ideal types of mythical and non-mythical politics of regret; real world cases may approximate these ideal types but are always somewhere in-between the two extremes. In this article, I build on Olick's empirical observations and assume that real world cases of political regret are currently close to the mythical side of the spectrum.

Some might be surprised (or even outraged) about the way this article assumes that, in practice, apologetic speech acts have strong mythical elements. It must be noted, however, that the concept of myth is defined in this essay in a way that does not imply anything about the historical accuracy of the claims underlying these commemorative acts. Even so, some might find the concept of myth confusing and would opt for terms that are less associated with falsity in everyday conversation. The problem is that the alternatives are not very appealing. Using the simple word 'narrative' would fail to capture an important quality of myths: the attempt to present a simplified reading of a complex historical event or process which in turn allows myths to effectively popularise representations of the self and of the wider community. The term 'discourse' is too broad; a myth is certainly a type of discourse or a 'truth regime', but not all discourses are identity-constitutive historical narratives. The usefulness of the concept of memory is also questionable. Even if many regard myth an 'old-

¹⁵ Allan Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 42.

fashioned concept'¹⁶ and an 'older term',¹⁷ it still seems to be more precise than the misleading metaphor of memory. Noa Gedi and Yigal Elam called the concept of memory 'an act of intrusion ... jostling aside older yet still effective working terms, and unavoidably obliterating fine distinctions'.¹⁸ Similarly, Henry Rousso noted that 'the concept of memory has been extensively interpreted to the extent that it now seems to define any kind of link between past and present'.¹⁹ To be fair, recent formulations of the concept of collective memory are more careful; Astrid Erll even argued that a third, more theoretically and methodologically conscious, wave in memory studies is in the making.²⁰ Consider Jan Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory,²¹ Richard Ned Lebow's terms of collective and institutional memory,²² Olick's thoughts on collected and collective memory,²³ or the idea of entangled memory presented by Gregor Feindt et al.²⁴ Even so, societies and groups are still 'said to remember, to forget, and to repress the past ... such language is at best metaphorical and at worst misleading about the phenomenon under study'.²⁵

Without trying to intervene in this conceptual debate, this article follows Bell in distinguishing between memory and myth. Memory is understood narrowly to refer to 'the socially-framed property of individual minds ... an individualistic psychological phenomenon *in so far* as it is a phenomenon that only individuals can possess properly'.²⁶ Shared representations of past events, however, 'should not be regarded as truly mnemonic. Instead, they should be conceived of as mythical'.²⁷ Free from the weight of terms such as collective memory and national memory, it is easier to acknowledge that there is never a single, unconditionally accepted historical narrative in any society. The governing myth always 'coexists with and is constantly contested by subaltern myths'.²⁸ The 'totality of myths within any given collective' is the mythscape, 'the discursive space in which the various myths of the collective are forged and challenged'.²⁹ The aim of this section was to

¹⁶ Claudio Fogu and Wulf Kansteiner, 'The Politics of Memory and the Poetics of History', in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, eds Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner, and Claudio Fogu (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 285.

¹⁷ Jeffrey K. Olick, 'Collective Memory: The Two Cultures', *Sociological Theory* 17, no. 3 (1999): 334.

¹⁸ Noa Gedi and Yigal Elam, 'Collective Memory – What Is It?', *History and Memory* 8, no. 1 (1996): 30.

¹⁹ Henry Rousso, 'The History of Memory: Brief Reflections on an Overloaded Field', in *Clashes in European Memory: The Case of Communist Repression and the Holocaust*, eds Muriel Blaive, Christian Gerbel and Thomas Lindenberger (Innsbruck: Studienverlag, 2011), 232.

²⁰ Astrid Erll, 'Travelling Memory', *Parallax* 17, no. 4 (2011): 4–18.

²¹ Jan Assmann, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', *New German Critique*, no. 65 (1995): 125–133.

²² Richard Ned Lebow, 'The Memory of Politics in Postwar Europe', in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, eds Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner, and Claudio Fogu (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 13.

²³ Olick, 'Collective Memory'.

²⁴ Gregor Feindt et al., 'Entangled Memory: Toward a Third Wave in Memory Studies', *History and Theory* 53, no. 1 (2014): 24–44.

²⁵ Wulf Kansteiner, 'Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies', *History and Theory* 41, no. 2 (2002): 185–186.

²⁶ Duncan Bell, 'Mythscape: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity', *British Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 1 (2003): 72.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁹ Bell, 'Agonistic Democracy and the Politics of Memory', 151.

demonstrate why it makes sense to say that the politics of regret should be regarded as part of the mythscape.

The Literature on the Politics of Regret

In this section, I will outline the most important strands of literature that have attempted to address questions related to the politics of regret. By highlighting what I perceive to be the most acute limitations of these frameworks and why I consider them inadequate for studying the phenomenon at hand, I aim to demonstrate that new, more critical approaches to the politics of regret are necessary. Olick criticised the comparative and the moral philosophy approaches, the two dominant analytical frameworks for studying the politics of regret, and encouraged a historical sociological approach to the phenomenon. I mostly agree with Olick's critique but I also find that all three frameworks lack the critical edge that this article aims to strengthen. In the following, I will address each of these approaches in turn.

The Comparative Approach

Most of the empirical study of the politics of regret has taken place in the field of transitology, where state apology for a certain past wrong is considered to be 'an institution of transitional justice'. This approach usually concentrates on comparing a variety of transitional experiences in order to determine what factors influenced the different 'mix' of transitional justice mechanisms pursued by different countries and what choices were most effective in consolidating the emerging democratic order. While admitting that these research questions are crucially important, Olick criticised this approach for the methods it usually employs to answer them. Most of the relevant works in transitology compare regime changes from very different times taking place in very different countries and believe that an infallible recipe to enhance the accuracy of the analysis is to consider as many cases as possible. In its quest for a general model of transition, this literature's "variables" approach removed much of the context from the analysis, erasing the peculiarities of specific cases ... virtually any case is a grist in the analytical mill'.³⁰ To support this claim, Olick only mentioned works from the early years of transitology,³¹ but I believe that recent developments in the literature all but confirm these claims. The most notable initiative in this vein is the Transitional Justice Data Base Project in which over 900 transitional justice experiences are compiled with the aim of rendering their statistical analysis more meaningful with this large sample.³² The politics of regret can only be studied on such a scale at a very high level of abstraction or with significant conceptual stretching; thus I agree with Olick that this 'scientific' approach is inappropriate for understanding a process that seems to be deeply rooted in social relations and historical experiences.

³⁰ Olick, *The Politics of Regret*, 129.

³¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991); Neil J. Kritz, *Transitional Justice: How Emerging Democracies Reckon With Former Regimes* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1995); Claus Offe, *Varieties of Transition: The East European and East German Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1996).

³² <https://sites.google.com/site/transitionaljusticedatabase/>

While Olick attacks existing explanations primarily on the grounds that their use of mainstream quantitative methods is unsuitable for studying the politics of regret, I also question whether the underlying theoretical framework of transitology is appropriate for the analysis of this research problem. First, the cornerstone of this literature, the emphasis on the model of transition from authoritarianism to democracy, seems problematic in this research context. The politics of regret can emerge with or without regime change.³³ The crimes that may be candidates for commemoration were not necessarily committed in an authoritarian system.³⁴ A democratic political system is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the emergence of the politics of regret. Furthermore, by viewing democratisation simply as the introduction of a set of rules, institutions and norms, this approach takes for granted a process that is a result of historical contingencies and disregards the various ways it rests on the creation of meanings. Finally, by using a conception of the politics of regret as a form of historical justice, transitology focuses almost exclusively on policy decisions while it misses the essential representational and discursive aspects of the problem. Although state apologies are important and tend to have a high influence on the wider discourse about certain historical events, the emphasis should not be on these policy decisions and their enactment but on the way the problematic period of the past has been represented through them and through other means. Contrary to many previous transitology essays on the topic, the discursive aspects of the politics of regret should be at the centre of the critical analysis.

The Historical Sociological Approach

Theorising about why the politics of regret has recently become so prevalent is not limited to the empirical analyses of transitology. A number of explanations has emerged which place this phenomenon in grander historical sociological narratives. As mentioned earlier, Olick's theory is that we are undergoing a profound memory crisis similar to the one that occurred at the end of the nineteenth century. The difference is that whereas at that time the primary role of the memory frenzy was to strengthen nationalist sentiments and patriotism, in our times the politics of regret has become the new grounds for legitimation. With the gradual decline of the nation state, legitimacy is no longer sought after in referring to heroic golden ages, but in remembering the criminal past. Olick's perspective thus 'places memory and regret properly at the center of its sociological account of modernity'.³⁵ He contrasted this conception with the theory of Jürgen Habermas on post-conventional identities which regards modern identities as problematically constituted of particularistic (localised, nationalist) feelings and universalistic (transnational) values.³⁶ Following this line of thought, suggested Olick, the recent wave of state apologies can be interpreted as a sign of the rise of universalistic principles of justice which are associated with more 'mature', post-conventional identities. Finally, Pierre Nora claimed that 'memory is constantly on our lips

³³ Consider, for example, the apologies or semi-apologies (signs of compassion narrowly falling short of a full-fledged apology) offered by many Western officials for particularly cruel acts during colonial rule (provided, of course, that we do not consider the break-up of colonial empires as a series of 'regime changes').

³⁴ Think about Abu Ghraib.

³⁵ Olick, *The Politics of Regret*, 130.

³⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

because it no longer exists'.³⁷ In his view, memory and the sacred have been expelled from society together with the nation as the foundation of identity, and the recent 'memory boom', upholding the traces of memory (*lieux de mémoire*) we have left, is thus a substitute for real, lived memories (*milieux*).

It is important to note that, notwithstanding their very different approaches to the problem, all these accounts agree that the decline of the nation state or of nationalist sentiments is an essential condition for the emergence of the politics of regret. But is it not dangerous to base abstract explanations and grand historical narratives on this claim without actually examining its validity on empirical grounds? Is the assumption about the general decline of nationalism tenable? The politics of regret may very possibly emerge as a response to the rise of nationalist politics, not to their decline. Consider, for instance, the recent phenomenon of the 'pan-European politics of regret'. Following the practice of some of its member states, the European Parliament approved the 27th of January as the European remembrance day of the Holocaust in 2005. Robert Jan van Pelt demonstrated that these national policies and the European measure were very likely aimed at counteracting the general rise of the far-right and of anti-Semitism.³⁸ In this instance, memory politics arose because of the rise of nationalism, not because of its decline.

Naturally, a single counter-example does not invalidate any of these historical sociological explanations that make sweeping generalisations about a number of cases. It should also be acknowledged that this approach is certainly an improvement over the transitology framework in some respects. Historical sociological accounts do not subscribe to the mechanical worldview of the comparative approach which assumes that all instances of political regret have the same underlying causal structure (the assumption of unit homogeneity). Furthermore, unlike transitology, the historical sociological approach pays due attention to the cultural aspects of political regret. I nevertheless consider both approaches governed by problem-solving thinking because they both produce the same type of objectifying knowledge that reifies social arrangements instead of challenging them. They try to explain a social phenomenon as if it was 'out there' to be observed and consequently ignore the role of the knowledge they produce in the perpetuation of this very phenomenon.

The Moral Philosophical Approach

Moral philosophical discussions about political regret usually aim to specify whether, why and how past atrocities should be commemorated, and by whom.³⁹ The German 'coming to terms' with the Holocaust is arguably the most important empirical basis for any discussion

³⁷ Pierre Nora, ed, *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past. I Conflicts and Divisions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 1.

³⁸ Robert Jan van Pelt, 'January 27, 1945 AD / 13 Shevat, 5705 AM. A Defining Moment in Modern European History?' (presented at the Second Networking Meeting with Organizations Active in the Field of Memory and Remembrance, Copenhagen, Denmark, 2012).

³⁹ See, for example, Barkan and Karn, *Taking Wrongs Seriously*; Stanley Cohen, 'State Crimes of Previous Regimes: Knowledge, Accountability, and the Policing of the Past', *Law & Social Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (1995): 7–50; *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001); Dimitrijevic, *Duty to Respond*; Gesine Schwan, 'Political Consequences of Silenced Guilt', *Constellations* 5, no. 4 (1998): 472–491; Smith, *I Was Wrong*.

about historical responsibility and has profoundly inspired moral arguments about political regret. Emmanuel Levinas viewed the Holocaust as ‘the greatest historical instantiation of bad conscience’⁴⁰ and the ‘memory of injustice’⁴¹ has fundamentally changed the way people relate to each other. Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, by establishing ‘the historical link between memories of the Holocaust and the emergence of a moral consensus about human rights’,⁴² argued that the scope of this effect on relations between people has in fact been global. They even remarked that the ‘Holocaust is now a concept that has been dislocated from space and time, resulting in its inscription into other acts of injustice and other traumatic national memories across the globe.’⁴³

It must not be forgotten, however, that the Holocaust is a very special case. The assumptions based on its de-contextualised conception are often untenable in other historical contexts and thus render the theories which rely on them exceptionally rigid and unresponsive. For this reason, Olick was right to point out that the moral philosophical discussion is often extremely abstract and ahistorical, rests on an assumption of ‘unilinear and teleological model of social and moral development’⁴⁴ and refrains from cultural contextualisation in the fear that it would open the way for relativizing moral values. Far from embracing moral relativism, Olick essentially agreed with the values and the goals of the moral philosophy approach but took issue with the way it proposed to achieve these goals. True to their Kantian foundations, moral philosophical discussions of political regret hold that moral duties need to be honoured irrespective of historical conditions. In the spirit of the formula ‘ought implies can’, these approaches pay little attention to the limits of political action in particular historical contexts and to the wider social repercussions of the measures aimed at achieving the ends dictated by categorical imperatives. Based on Weber, Olick identified this logic with the ethic of conviction and thought that ethical discussions of political regret should instead follow the ethic of responsibility: become more practical and contextualised, and pay more attention to historical conditions of possibility. The two approaches essentially aim to achieve the same goals, but disagree sharply about the way these goals should be achieved.

Even though the cure proposed by Olick is far from clear, the diagnosis he presented is accurate. Moral philosophical discussions of political regret are ideal theories in the sense that they try to specify how past atrocities should be commemorated in an abstract, idealised situation. Neglecting historical context and conditions of possibility, these accounts have a tendency to ‘depoliticise’ regret. It all begins with language. When referring to what I call the politics of regret, the traditional transitional justice conceptual framework prefers to use expressions such as ‘a society fulfils its duty to remember’ or ‘a nation honours the memory of the victims’. I have intentionally chosen the terminology used in this article to break with this apparently apolitical form of speech. By referring to all the approaches to past events as

⁴⁰ R. Clifton Spargo, *Vigilant Memory: Emmanuel Levinas, the Holocaust, and the Unjust Death* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 119.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁴² Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 20.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁴ Olick, *The Politics of Regret*, 125.

‘politics’, I attempt to overcome the common practice of considering apology and the assumption of responsibility as morally desirable in all circumstances, while viewing all the other strategies as morally wanting and as results of dirty political meddling. I retain the concepts of politics of denial and politics of silence from this literature because I believe that these categories are extremely useful for analytical purposes. However, I am aware that employing them unreflectively and with their value-laden connotations is dangerous as that way oversimplified moral judgements (that apology is unequivocally good and denial and silence are unequivocally immoral) and untenable empirical claims (that apology is either apolitical or its underlying politics is irrelevant for moral considerations) would enter the analysis already at the level of concept formation. Naturally, the wording of categories has not become ‘neutral’ in any sense; rather, my conceptual framework simply conveys a different preconception, one which holds that political struggles and power games have an important part to play in the propagation of all of these strategies.

Aspiring for apolitical regret on the social level is naive. In practice, the politics of memory and the ethics of memory ‘are interwoven, and they cannot – or at least should not – be separated’.⁴⁵ Once the arguments of moral theories are used to evaluate specific cases, are invoked in political debates or are considered to be implemented in practice, they inevitably become politics rather than a purely moral theory. The moral philosophy approach should recognise and consciously evaluate the political dimension of its work. At the moment, however, moral theories of regret are only concerned with achieving morally desirable goals derived from abstract, idealised situations and do not take into account the potential political use and the likely social implications of their assumptions and arguments. This is not simply politically naive, but also irresponsible and politically dangerous.

Moral philosophy accounts routinely take for granted that a (hypothetical or real) community exists within which commemoration does or should take place and that a historical narrative exists that the members of this community do or should commemorate. Essentializing these two things is problematic because neither of them are naturally occurring phenomena that exist ‘out there’; instead of being eternal and static over time, they are the fragile and ever-changing products of historical contingencies. By considering communities and their myths self-evident, moral philosophical accounts (intentionally or unintentionally) reinforce the very taken-for-granted social realities that the critical take on political regret should challenge. As Bell noted, the ‘existence of a “collective memory” should not be the starting point of investigation or ethical stipulation. Rather, in attempting to grapple with ethical questions about the uses of the past it is vital to analyze the dynamics of popular historical consciousness and the ways in which particular “collective memories” come to be formed and reproduced, the social and political roles they perform (whether intentionally or not), and the modes of inclusion and exclusion they sanction.’⁴⁶

To assume that a single, incontestable version of the past exists, ‘that there is a particular memory we must work towards, that that which must be remembered may be clearly

⁴⁵ Bell, ‘Agonistic Democracy and the Politics of Memory’, 154.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 149.

identified⁴⁷ is indeed highly exclusionary and can easily lead to dogmatism about past events. This argument can be used to treat transgressions from the official version of the past as taboo which represses rational debate and ultimately favours the preservation of existing structures of power. Even if *the* past could be sufficiently clearly specified, the ‘duty to remember’ and to ‘never forget’ is a contradiction in terms. ‘Forgetting is not simply the opposite of remembering. Remembering is structurally dependent on forgetting, is always marked by forgetting. This means that the idea of getting memory to conform more closely to “truth” is not only a narrow concern but one doomed to fail. Quite apart from the radical impossibility of “true” knowledge about the past, this simply ignores the inextricable relationship of remembering and forgetting’.⁴⁸ Similarly to Maja Zehfuss, I maintain that the social response to grave historical injustices and mass crimes should not be a firmly believed and stubbornly defended ‘answer as to what constitutes appropriate memory’.⁴⁹ In the case of the moral philosophy literature, this answer takes the form of an insistence on a single morally right reading of ‘the past’. I agree with Zehfuss that ‘[w]hen we have all available information but still know that we do not know we are most open to the need of an ethico-political decision’.⁵⁰ The role of the critical scholarly approach is essentially not the ‘debunking’ or the reinforcement of one mythical narrative or another (activities that belong to the realm of giving answers), but the raising of questions, the refinement of concepts, and the education of the tools necessary for the critical evaluation of myths. Even if this attitude chooses not to take sides in the struggle between particular political myths (because it does not accept the exclusionary trait inherent in myths), the critical perspective is not a ‘point from nowhere’. It should learn from the shortcomings of moral philosophy and become situated knowledge: contextualised, consciously intervening in real political debates and aware of the likely social implications of its assumptions and arguments.

The Critical Approach to the Politics of Regret

As this short literature review has hopefully demonstrated, previous studies of the politics of regret have often been characterised by sweeping generalisations, problematic assumptions and doubtful methodological choices. More importantly, these approaches lack the critical perspective that challenges taken-for-granted assumptions and prevailing social arrangements, serves as a guide for human action, encourages self-reflection, and combats oppression, exclusion and discrimination.⁵¹

Unlike the comparative and the historical sociological approaches, the aim of critical scholarship is not to explain the causes underlying the current preoccupation with political regret. The goal is not to explain but to change; what I mean by this Marxist-flavoured quip is

⁴⁷ Maja Zehfuss, ‘Remembering to Forget/Forgetting to Remember’, in *Memory, Trauma and World Politics: Reflections on the Relationship Between Past and Present*, ed Duncan Bell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 214. For instance, Dimitrijevic assumed that ‘in all mass crimes one particular set of facts and one particular evaluative stance are beyond dispute’. Dimitrijevic, *Duty to Respond*, 18.

⁴⁸ Zehfuss, ‘Remembering to Forget/Forgetting to Remember’, 228.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 229–230.

⁵¹ Inspired by Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

that attention should be drawn to the problematic discursive practices that determine how political regret, as well as other forms of political mythologies, are discussed and thought about. At the heart of the critical approach to the politics of regret is not a search for patterns, laws, or regularities ‘out there’ that need to be discovered, but an attempt to expose and challenge discriminatory cultural practices.

Contrary to moral philosophical discussions, the critical position should not turn a blind eye to the exclusionary character of the politics of regret and present it as an unequivocally good, socially beneficial and morally superior approach to the past. Political regret should be properly understood as an element of the mythscape and its critical examination should be part of a broader scholarly enterprise that challenges the exclusionary character of mythologies.⁵² In the following, I will explain why a critical stance with respect to mythologies (including the politics of regret) is necessary and what form it should take.

What is good and bad about political myths? Thinkers with an anthropological understanding of mythologies, like Harald Wydra,⁵³ often hold that myths are a necessary condition for normal social life. Without them, social harmony and peace are not even conceivable. As shared images of the past and markers of certainty, they provide cohesion for a community and allow people to understand the world around them. The problem with this approach is that it appreciates mythologies too readily and rarely has the means of critique by which highly exclusionary and oppressive myths can be challenged.⁵⁴

Marxist accounts agree that myths are a cohesive force, but they argue that this cohesion is not in the interests of those who are bound together this way. They are misled and suffer from false consciousness as they internalise values and interests that are contrary to their own. Therefore, the social cohesion provided by myths is in fact coercive. The ultimate function of mythologies is then to enforce conformity to the demands of the ruling elite, and to mask and mystify the interests of those in power. The aim of this scholarship, exemplified by Eric Hobsbawm, is to expose the historical falsity of these ‘invented’ stories and thus produce enlightenment in the oppressed so that they can follow their true interests.⁵⁵

⁵² This does not mean that there should be no myths at all. At the moment, it is somewhat utopian to talk about a social world without simplified historical narratives that ground images of the self and of one’s social environment. However, as Jens Bartelson noted, the reliance of identity on myths is probably more contingent than necessary. This means that a society in which identities are based on something other than mythical stories might not be so impossible to imagine. It is true that the search for meaning is an anthropological constant but it is not obvious that our markers of certainty have to be rooted in the commemoration of past events. Whether such a world is desirable is of course another question. Jens Bartelson, ‘We Could Remember It for You Wholesale: Myths, Monuments and the Constitution of National Memories’, in *Memory, Trauma and World Politics: Reflections on the Relationship Between Past and Present*, ed Duncan Bell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 33–53.

⁵³ Harald Wydra, ‘Introduction: Democracy in Eastern Europe – Myth and Reality’, in *Democracy and Myth in Russia and Eastern Europe*, eds Alexander Wöll and Harald Wydra (London: Routledge, 2008), 1–24.

⁵⁴ For instance, the myths employed by the National Socialists in Germany.

⁵⁵ Eric J. Hobsbawm, ‘Introduction: Inventing Traditions’, in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1–14; Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Wary of the notion of objective truth, the critical attitude is not concerned with the historical accuracy of myths.⁵⁶ It recognises that myths can help to consolidate a given social or group order but they are also important in challenging these. Myths are double-edged swords: they simultaneously bind with some people and alienate from others, legitimate an authority and undermine others, enable and constrain social action. Therefore, instead of asking whether any particular myth or myths in general are good or bad, true or false, we should try to determine how narratives that all claim to have exclusive right to the discursive space can best be accommodated in the least discriminatory way.

Bell outlined the backbone of an ethical framework that simultaneously acknowledges and challenges all myths. He claimed that all myths deserve to be acknowledged at a public level in the sense that their content and historical accuracy should not be a basis for their exclusion or suppression. The task of the state is thus not to project a certain version of the past that legitimates prevailing institutions and perpetuates a 'peaceful social order', but to establish the institutional possibilities for a space where myths can openly confront each other on a level playground. This ethics of myth does not single out any particular myth for criticism (not even the governing one) but encourages a critical attitude towards all exclusionary narratives. While it is not clear how the state can act as a benevolent guardian over the mythscape, this vision contains a very important insight: individuals are not necessarily products and captives of mythologies, but, to some extent, are also capable of critically evaluating and challenging them. It is difficult to imagine a situation in which the state retreats from the mythscape and refrains from favouring certain narratives while marginalising others. The exclusionary tendencies of mythologies, however, could be successfully tamed if individuals were more aware of the uncertainty and the complexity of the past and were better equipped with the tools necessary to take a more critical stance towards simplified narratives.⁵⁷

Bearing in mind all of the above, the responsibility of the critical scholar is to support the acknowledgement of the right to existence of all interpretations of the past and at the same time promote the necessity of a critical stance towards myths by raising awareness of their exclusionary characteristics. In this vein, the vocation of the critical historian is to stress 'the contingency, opacity, and plurality of the past' and to be 'self-reflective, aware of the partiality, weak foundations, fallibility of their enterprise, as opposed to the intrinsic simplicity and univocality of mythology'.⁵⁸ In order to arrive at what Said called a 'non-coercive and non-dominating knowledge',⁵⁹ no 'voice' should be given absolute priority (either in a positive, affirming or negative, dismissive way). The critical scholarly attitude thus does not uphold or challenge any particular myth based on its content or historical

⁵⁶ Note that the statement 'there is no such thing as historical truth' itself is also a statement of absolute truth. In this sense, the critical account also propagates a certain 'regime of truth' but there is no form of knowledge that does not do so (or if there is one, it is probably not worth having).

⁵⁷ This approach is not exclusionary as it acknowledges the right to existence of myths of any kind, even those that claim incontestability, but at the same time it consciously tries to undermine the incontestability assumption that gives strength to myths.

⁵⁸ Bell, 'Agonistic Democracy and the Politics of Memory', 153.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Geeta Chowdhry, 'Edward Said and Contrapuntal Reading: Implications for Critical Interventions in International Relations', *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 36, no. 1 (2007): 105.

accuracy, but leads a comprehensive intellectual attack on the exclusionary traits of mythical thinking in general.

If we consider political regret as a form of mythical thinking, we might be able to see it as part of a mythscape where identity-constitutive narratives (that are sometimes boastful and self-congratulatory, sometimes regretful and self-flagellatory) are pitted against each other but ultimately follow the same discriminatory logic. The politics of regret may be replacing stories of national glory as the basis of legitimacy, but it definitely follows the very same exclusionary logic that makes national myths incompatible with liberal democratic principles.⁶⁰ This implies that political regret should neither be considered a coping strategy superior to others, nor singled out for criticism. The scholarly attention to it should form part of a more general challenge to the wholeness of the underlying discursive frameworks which enable and constrain discussion about political regret and other forms of political mythologies.

Conclusion

In this article, I argued for the importance of thinking about the politics of regret critically, within academia and beyond. I explained what the responsibility of the critical scholar is with respect to political regret and how it should be viewed in a broader social environment. My argument rested on the empirical assumption that actual cases of the politics of regret are mostly mythical and for this reason they should be considered to be part of the totality of myths, the mythscape. The critical approach to political regret is thus part of a broader scholarly enterprise that emphasises the necessity to recognise myths as myths and not to regard them as the apolitical, taken-for-granted stories they claim to be; it argues for the need to be aware of the potentially problematic elements and consequences of mythical thinking and for the importance of critical self-reflection in this light.

Similarly to Zehfuss, I maintain that the ethico-political solution to dramatic historical experiences is not simply about more information about past events or ‘knowing our past better’ (note the reference to *the* past in the singular again); these common responses to the ‘memory crisis’ are important but in themselves insufficient measures to address difficult conceptual and normative questions about the representation of historical events. Some issues cannot be settled with the addition of historical detail but can only be approached with an open mind if we ‘know that we do not know’.

This essay attempted to militate against the exclusionary features of mythical thinking, against its insistence on one particular reading of past events and its tendency to present itself as natural, neutral, consensual, commonsensical. If we accept that the politics of regret is in fact mythical, the assumption that it is a morally superior and socially more beneficial coping strategy than other forms of memory politics becomes questionable. But it also means that the politics of regret should be properly understood as a voice in the mythscape; consequently,

⁶⁰ Arash Abizadeh convincingly argued that national myths ‘invariably do make historical truth claims, and ... historical myths of this sort are indefensible within the framework of liberal democratic political philosophy.’ Arash Abizadeh, ‘Historical Truth, National Myths and Liberal Democracy: On the Coherence of Liberal Nationalism’, *Journal of Political Philosophy* 12, no. 3 (2004): 291–292.

criticising only the politics of regret indirectly reinforces the legitimacy of other mythologies and other forms of memory politics. In order to avoid this bias, the critical scholarly attitude outlined in this article places the study of the politics of regret at the centre of a general critique of political mythologies.

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